

Wisconsin's Elk Reintroduction



Background

Historic records show elk once inhabited at least 50 of Wisconsin's 72 counties. Elk were extirpated from Wisconsin in the mid to late 1800s due to unregulated hunting and a rapid decline in habitat, and an attempt to bring elk back to the state in the 1930s failed. Today, suitable elk habitat can be found primarily in the northern and central forest regions of the state. Land conversion in southern Wisconsin from prairie to agriculture, coupled with high human occupancy, has resulted in little to no suitable habitat.

Early reintroduction

In 1989, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources was directed by the state legislature to explore the feasibility of successfully reintroducing elk, moose and/or caribou. The resulting study determined that an elk reintroduction effort had the highest potential for success.

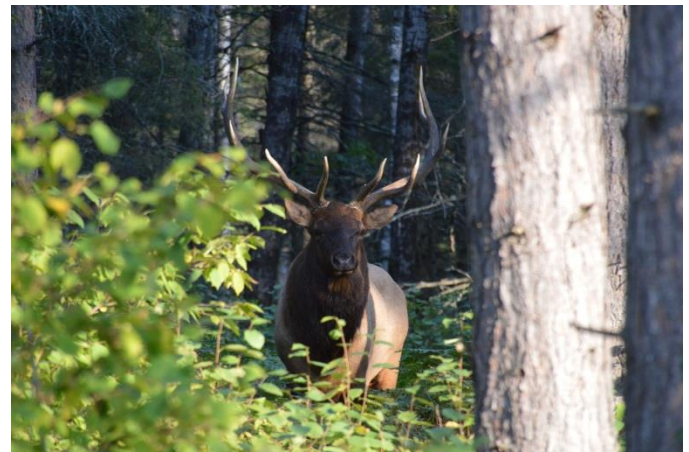
In 1993, the Wisconsin state legislature authorized the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point to evaluate the potential for reintroducing elk to the Great Divide District of the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest near the town of Clam Lake.

In February 1995, 25 elk were trapped, held in a quarantine facility for 90 days while undergoing rigorous disease testing, and transported to the Clam Lake release site. After being held in a pen for a two week acclimation period, the elk were released May 17, 1995. The herd has been intensively studied and monitored since the release, and has helped guide management decisions.

After the initial reintroduction study was considered a success in May 1999, management responsibility of the herd was transferred to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. At that time, approximately 40 elk were present in the herd.

Current herd

As of April 2014, approximately 160 elk were present in the state, comprised of the main herd near Clam Lake and a second smaller herd located near Butternut. Various herd growth strategies have been used to help the elk occupy their designated 1,600 mi² Clam Lake Elk Range, including assisted dispersal. Since 1995, the herd has grown at an average rate of 13 percent annually. However, growth rates have varied from as high as 30 percent to as low as -16 percent since 1995. Primary causes of mortality include predation and vehicle collisions, although several causes of death have been recorded. Primary habitat used by the elk consists of aspen and other young forest growth interspersed with mature forest, forest openings, and lowland conifers.



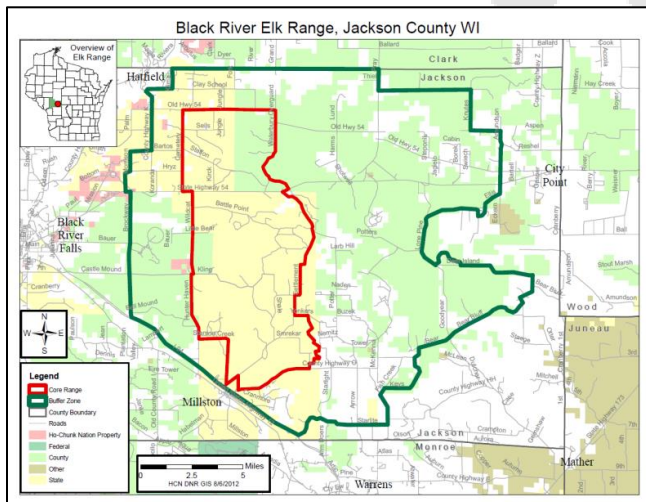
A MATURE BULL ELK NEAR CLAM LAKE. PHOTO: JEFF MORDEN

Current management practices were updated with an amendment to both the Black River and Clam Lake Elk Management Plans in 2012. These updated plans focus on continued research and monitoring, assisted dispersal to quality habitat, and a supplemental increase and reintroduction by importation of wild elk from Kentucky.

For more information on elk in Wisconsin, visit dnr.wi.gov, search keyword "elk."

Elk in Jackson County

Following the reintroduction of elk to the Clam Lake area, the Jackson County board adopted a resolution to support similar efforts on public lands in eastern Jackson County. The department determined that historical and adequate elk habitat existed in the Black River State Forest and surrounding area. After conducting public meetings, significant support from the community for an elk reintroduction was received.



In 2001, the Natural Resources Board approved the Black River Elk Herd Management Plan. The Black River Elk Range is approximately 320 square miles, with significant amounts of publicly owned lands, and is located in the Central Forest region of eastern Jackson County. A population goal of 390 elk was established in the original management plan.

Current Reintroduction Efforts

In December 2014, a five-year agreement was reached between Wisconsin and Kentucky that would provide Wisconsin with up to 150 wild elk. Upon finalizing the agreement, both states immediately began plans to trap up to 50 wild Kentucky elk per year for up to five years starting in 2015, with a total capture goal of 150 elk. Once trapping ceases each year, the elk will be quarantined for a combined 120 days in both Kentucky and Wisconsin and tested for a variety of diseases. When all health requirements are fulfilled, the elk can be released in Wisconsin.

In 2015, all elk will be released in Jackson County, while future years will see animals released in both this area and the existing Clam Lake herd. Ultimately, the goal is to release 75 elk within each area. Wisconsin's overall goal is to grow the Clam Lake elk herd to roughly 1,400 animals, while approximately 400 are desired in the Black River Elk Range.



CAPTURE TEAM MEMBERS IN KENTUCKY. PHOTO: JON SCHWEITZER

The Importance of Partnerships

This current reintroduction effort is a great example of partnership and collaboration in action. Major partners in current reintroduction efforts include the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Jackson County Wildlife Fund, Ho-Chunk Nation, Bands of the Lake Superior Ojibwa, Jackson County Forest and Parks, U.S. Forest Service and others. The project is being funded entirely with private donations.



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